

THE TRIAL

Cycle of poems (sonnets)
that won the Epstein Award
for Creative Writing in 1958

SONNET CYCLE

1.

You let the questions ask you that ask me,
and in the courtroom of your world you sit
amongst the jury watching opposite
^{caption} yourself brought into dock (in-chains) while he
of you upon the bench speaks like the sea
by laws beyond despair and ruth, by writ.
And as you read aloud the charge, submit
to let the future introduce your plea.

UNFIT TO LIVE, proof: STILL ALIVE ! Unless
~~ye~~
your hands bleed let us hammer into silence
the thirteen of your selves who came to play
and mock as mooncalf-case cause and defence.
For we are at the trial to confess
~~do the same~~
why we are human and forgot to pray.

11. July '56

Why we are human and forgot to pray
are charge and countercharge that echo crime
^{are} along the soundproof corridor of time
by which we enter court and leave to stay.

Is not the ecstasy of flesh a way
to understand ? Is not to love to mime
creation and creator in their prime ?
Must we not celebrate our birth from clay ?

In the eternal black-out of the skull
the plaintiff rises to accuse, and cull
the petals from the ribald stalk of passion

unveiling thus the snake with ogles ashen
that pierce us till we cannot disobey
while on the battle-field our hearts decay.

3.

While on the battle-field our hearts decay
our freedom is at home at stake around
the halfway house that you and I have found
amidst the ivory galaxies that may

abandon our globe if we betray
the secret sacred agents underground.

Why did you fail to reach beyond the mound ?
Why like the moonbow did you not essay

your silver flight of prayers upon the void ?
I am forever autumn-leaf and coast
across the spent fields of my past decoyed

with promises of uprise by the host
down to the shores where ebb and tide agree:
Why is there world at all ? Who holds the key ?

Why is there world at all ? Who holds the key ?
 You're here to be asked not to ask. You quest
 while under charge of questing your last guest
 sane in the garden by the apple-tree.

You had your choice, ^{+ for led when you were free !} Now down upon your knee,
 The thirteen that are audience protest:
 We grew like mushrooms under pines unblessed
 and know not origin nor pedigree.

Yet we are you and you are I and I
 am but your own reflected guarantee,
 and if we jeer, judge, it's to crucify

you on the bench who nods at everything.
 There woke outside the nightingale to sing
 to god the epic of mortality.

To god the epic of mortality
attains perfection in each martyrdom.

Yet you still swing upon a pendulum
~~that rarely follows is or jubilee~~
that's gallows rarely and not ~~(often glee,~~

that times and is timed by eternity
and strikes forever each millenium
~~though you hear not in your delirium~~
~~though you hear not the rhythm of the drum~~
~~The Titan chime that spells the prime decree.~~
that spells the vital message and decree.

If we who are all eye and ear, all sky
and sphere, all laughter, tear and lullaby,
if we cannot conceive within the womb
of fantasy or reason night nor day
the plan, yet are at fault, then to their doom
are man and woman early gone astray.

6.

Are man and woman early gone astray
in their unholy match not Phoenix-like ?
Is not their flesh and fretwork our dike
along the Stygian shore where we repay ?

Through cotton-clouds that clean for morn display
the swart face of the sky the moonlights strike
a sea of soiled unsightly shapes alike
mephitic in their nude contortive sway.

This is the crucible of human love
~~that~~ you and you and you, you all and I
have failed to reach to grow to rise above.

Upon the quagmire which is our way
we plead telestial laws do not apply
to us who are the human pack at bay.

To us who are the human pack at bay
who take our stand at the abysmal brink
of nowhere notime nothing whence we shrink
what matters is that past and future, way

and tutor hoodwink not nor loot or slay
the present which is rock root roof and link
of the abode that bids us hope and think.
The calloused craftsman-hand knows how to pray;

But you and I accused condemned acquitted
a thousand times for what was once comitted
though we be humble cannot bend the knee.

Let sleeping gods lie with their holy clues.
Forgotten or remembered we shall lose.
The strife unhides in ~~time~~ ^{tomb} and ~~tomb~~ ^{time} to be.

The strife unhides in ~~time and tomb~~ to be
 while truth arrives on board alone as soon
 as dusk spills gentle mists into lagoon
 and cove along the coast that curbs our sea,

 and from the light-house ghosts swift repartee
 our homeward quest and wave us past harpoon
 and whale into our final port tootsoon.
 O for a sail full of good wind to flee !

In all the cosmic theatre ~~your~~ ^u role,
 your call is the most meaningful and moving;
 Yet you, and you alone, refuse your dole.

This is of your mistakes the most severe:
 that you will live and die without approving
 when every breath demands that ~~you~~ ^{He} adhere.

9.

When every breath demands that ~~you~~ ^{We} adhere
~~you~~ counter with revolt the destined fate,
~~you are the most insistent rebel naif.~~

As if you could escape the pyre of life
that burns and turns each shrine into a bier.

Was not our image carved and our career
upon the altar with the hallowed knife ?
Is not the human monograph yet rife
with proof of our immortal mission here ?

The echo beckons me to recognise
Narcissus in the mirror as the speaker,
and when I see in cloud and lake, in bight,

in furrows ploughed myself like mandrake rise
to spite and ridicule myself the seeker
I cannot sing my song of ^{earthless} mirthful flight.

I cannot sing my song of ~~mirthful~~^{earthless} flight
 before a court that trusts a broken creed.
 We roamed the musty moss-foamed woods in need
 of monasteries and met the eremite

who haunts the only footpath to requite
 an ancient lonely irreligious deed
 sprung from his own experimental seed
~~that fruited on his halo a curse + a blight.~~
 with the most cruel curse he can invite.

For when the sun begins to sculpt and mould
 out of the glassless black transparency
 of utter umbrage worldwise with its gold

he turns a sprite and seeks security
 inside the crumbling temple of a seer
 behind the barbed-wire question-marks of fear.

Behind the barbed-wire question-marks of fear
 you pace your own quixotic impotence
 in search of exiles without church or fence
 where seven offer one voice to the sphere.

Yet in your ill-allotted camp inhere
 no exits but the leap across defence
 and charge, beyond fatuity and sense
 into the nearness of that distant pier

where what you sought to conjure (~~with words charmed~~)
~~with slight of hand awants~~
~~bewitched and whispered bides~~) your fortitude
 to journey into no man's land and vent

both crystal tenderness and (~~craving's armed~~)
~~ferment~~
 attack not easily on pleasure's brood
 but in the womb of rapture and lament.

12.

But in the womb of rapture and lament
^{alone}
 ^ the angel ~~sever~~ reaches for our core
^{when}
 ^ ~~see~~ you and I reach for the other shore,
 + ~~It's~~ in this mutual reaching we are bent

on god as we bend back towards the advent
of which our birth is prologue metaphor
and pioneer, and ~~our~~ death perhaps encore.

Until, we let each question document

and tear our flesh, and let the sane blood flow
from hand and head, from sand and wood and air
into an ocean larger than despair

to bear our wayward life-boat home and show
that when we dare the paradox and plight
we father as we ask the answer right.

We father as we ask the answer right
and each right answer fathers further quest.
All owns within the force to manifest
both doom and resurrection recondite.

When heavily the peasant walks the height
with dew-wet step across the cockcrow-blessed
awakening fields and punctuates abreast
the frosty air with his albescence kite

of milk-moist breath he carries on his back
the blazing bayonet charge of his scythe.
Accused! You fabricate and feign torment

and doubt to disavow cognition's tithe
of sacrifice and rite although you track
and reap each harvest wine and bread and lent.

And reap each harvest bread and wine and lent
instead of a Te Deum at the stake
the flames will whisper Amen at the snake
and all will naked dance your testament.

The jury finds you guilty of contempt
of thought, of self-cult, cowardice and fake.
You chose the haunted impasse when awake
and knew it ended in imprisonment.

My one exhibit is my soul to prove
with all their motives heart and mind are hill
and cave, are windmill, ^{Sanctuary} wave and ~~resary~~,
are cobweb and black spider, compass, groove
and charter of a world you know not till
you let the questions ask you that ask me.

15,

(Master-Sonnet)

You let the questions ask you that ask me
why we are human and forgot to pray
while on the battle-field our hearts decay.
Why is there world at all? Who holds the key ?

To god the epic of mortality
is man and woman early gone astray.
To us who are the human pack at bay
the strife unhides in tomb and time, to be.

When every breath demands that you adhere
I cannot sing my song of earthless flight
behind the barbed-wire question-marks of fear.

But in the womb of rapture and lament
we father as we ask the answer right
and reap each harvest bread and wine and lent.